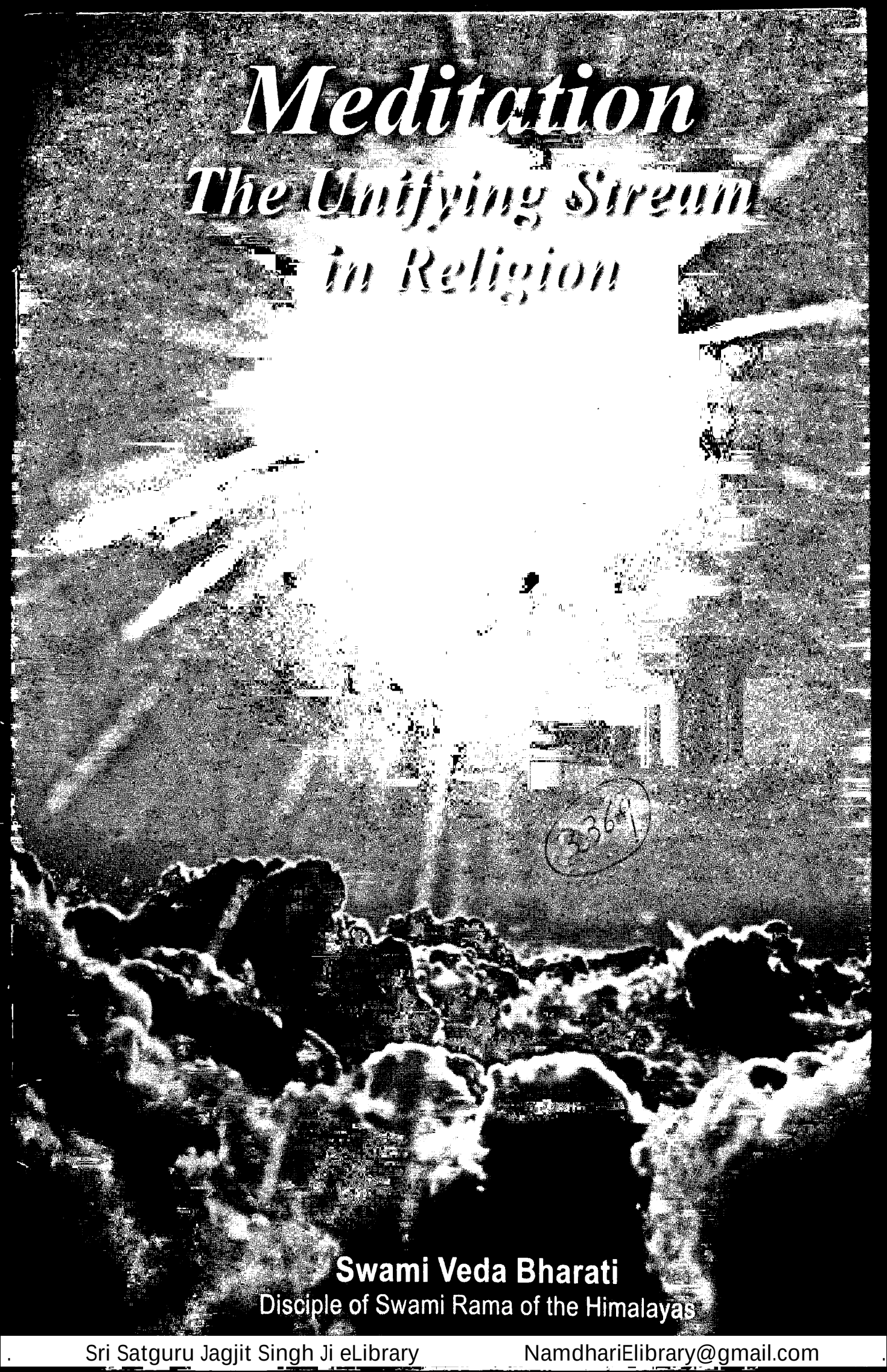
Meditation

The Unifying Stream in Religion



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MEDITATION

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MEDITATION:
THE UNIFYING STREAM IN RELIGIONS

The quest for unity among religions is an ancient one that continues to this day. A history of the successes of such quest will take a large volume to define and describe. Some of the many examples of such success, and how it was achieved, may be referred to here by way of illustration:

- Through reinterpretation. For example, the reinterpretation of the Old Testament to absorb the Jewish ideas into Christianity but with a different meaning.

- Through discussion among the leaders of various religions. For example, in the inter-religious conference among Hinduism, Buddhism, and Bali Aga, to give a cohesive form to the best elements among the three religions in Bali as early as the first century A.D.

- Through absorption of the ideas, beliefs systems and practices of an earlier religion onto a later one.

  The examples of this abound in history, such as (a) Christmas tree absorbed into Christianity, (b) The Hindu symbols and emblems in Thai Buddhism, (c) The Hindu legends and rituals absorbed into the Malay (Both Indonesian and Malaysian) Islam, (d) The Inca and Aztec deities absorbed as saint figures in South American Christianity, (e) The contemporary experiments in Africa to absorb the divine, celestial, saintly, or prophetic figures of the African tradition into the new churches and religions. (f) The Hindu songs sung with themes around Rama and Krishna adapted to the Muslim sentiment at the occasions like Muharram or the Qavvalis.

- Through mutual exchange of ideas, and an accommodation in the community, where there are parallels in the practices derived from different sources to enrich the lives of the individuals and societies. For example the successful

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exchange that occurred among Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism in China and Korea; among Taoism, Confucianism, Shintoism , and Buddhism in Japan; Hindu practices in South Asian Islam; Muslim and Christian practices in the contemporary Hinduism of many varieties.

Through understanding among neighbouring individuals and societies out of respect for each other, for example, Hindus distributing sweets to Muslims and vice versa for the celebration of Eid, and Muslims giving out sweets at occasions like Divali. Two examples in 2003: Iftar dinner given to Muslim leaders and divines by the *mahant* (Hindu pontiff) of Hanuman-garhi temple, heretofore deeply involved in the Babri Masjid agitation in Ayodhya: then a few days later, the Hanuman worship and recitation of Hanuman-chalisa at the Eid celebration in the Shah Alamgir Masjid.

Through reverence for sanctity, which is innate and almost instinctive, wherever it may be found. For example, the Hindus worshipping at the Dargahs of the Muslim Saints; the Muslims of Syria paying homage to the holy men of the Coptic tradition – a common phenomenon even today.

- Many other such processes of the development of mutual co-existence and absorption need to be researched in the entire world history, recognizing the fact that these did not take place out of a fear but from natural human urge towards amity and reverence.

One of the strongest bonds of unity among religions occurs when the contemplatives of various streams compare notes of the experience of divine silence where all doctrinal verbosity ceases and only an interior vast all engulfing peace prevails. Of this, later in the course of this essay.

The archetypes in the universal consciousness manifest themselves in numerous identical ways and forms in all the religious traditions. Again, a few examples of these parallel experiences may be cited here:

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- All religions have towering prophetic figures as their founders. These may be individual founders of a religion, for example Zarathustra the founder of the Mazdayasnians and Hazrat Muhammad, the founder of Islam. Groups of founders, for example, (a) lineages of rishis and divine Incarnations (avataras) in Hinduism, (b) the prophets of the Jewish lineage such as Abraham, Moses, and their descendants, (c) the Tirthankaras of the Jaina tradition, (d) the chain of Buddhas in both the Northern and the Southern versions of Buddhism, (e) the ten gurus of the Sikh faith.The tradition of reading and reciting the lives of the founders and the great sages of the religion.

- The fact of each religion's faith in the processes of divine revelations and the resulting sacred books.

- Sacred words, phrases, sentences, verses, texts which may be memorized and recited repeatedly.

- Sacred spaces and waters, whether natural phenomena such as mountains, holy rivers and streams or special edifices.

- Sacred music and chant.

- Prayer and liturgies. The forms and wording may differ, but the fact of prayer remains, even in religions that do not believe in a creator God.

- Different body positions for prayer such as sitting in a certain way or kneeling or standing with hands clasped or the hands open to heaven or whatever.

- The *mudras*, the gestures and positions of the face, hands and body parts as manifest in the divine and sacred figures.

- The importance of divine name. One begins 'with the name of Allah', or in the Zarathushtrian tradition, 'Pa nam-e yazdan Hormazd', or 'in the name of God, Son and Holy Ghost". The practice of starting a letter, a book or any endeavour by writing the name of God. The exhortations to remember the name of God in every breath. Glorifying the

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name of God, or of a divine figure where no creator God is accepted, in stories, legends, rituals, songs, and prayers.

- Sanctity of the transitions in (a) life-cycles, and (b) annual cycles, observed and celebrated through sacraments. Many of these sacraments celebrate identical transitions, such as birth, baptism, Jewish bar mitzvah or Vedic *upanayana*, confirmation, marriage, funeral, and so forth; the celebration of seasonal cycles, sacred months, and sacred days in the annual cycle.

- Dietary laws. (a) Prohibition on killing certain animals, whether because they pollute or because they are sacred. (b) Meatless days whether (i.) a belief in the sanctity of universal life force,

(ii.) presence of soul in all bodies, (iii.) simply as an act of penitence, self control or asceticism.

- Sanctity of marriage.

- Fasting, in varying degrees.

- Practice of celibacy, if not as a permanent vow, then during certain times of the life cycle and the annual cycle, for example (a) exhortations to the practice of Brahmacharya in the Vedic tradition until marriage, (b) celibacy during certain nights of the month, (c) celibacy for monks and priests in various traditions, (d) prohibition on being *ham-bistar* during the holy month of Ramzan, and so forth.

- Disciplines of clothing, for example, special habits or forms of garments for priests and monks, or covering the head for lay women and nuns in certain Catholic traditions, or taking off the hat or shoes as mark of reverence for the sacred ground, or other rules of modesty of clothing in the church, temple and mosque.

- Priestly orders, monastic orders.

- Stories of temptation and the conquest thereof. Examples are: the temptation of Nachiketas in the Vedic tradition; of

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Zarathushtra after 10 years in his cave; of the Buddha during the 49 days under the Bodhi Tree; of Jesus after the 40 days of seclusion; and the story of Shiva's cosmic temptation by Kamadeva, god of desire, during the former's perennial Samadhi, and the burning of Kamadeva to ashes through the beam of light emanating from Shiva's third eye.

- Period of seclusion, again, for 40 days of special spiritual endeavours such as practices of prayer, penitence, and self purification. For example, 40 days of Lent; 40 days of spring celebrations in India; 40 days of *chilla*, the Sufi practice of withdrawing into a place of solitude for intense and incessant ascetic effort whether in a *chilla-khana,* a cave, a forest or desert hermitage or at any other solitary place.

- Belief in a future redeemer: (a) the return of the founder of one's own religion as in the case of Jesus, (b) any other messiah as in the Jewish tradition, (c) the future Buddha like Maitreya in the Buddhist tradition, (d) the Kalki Avatara, the Divine Incarnation-to-be in Hinduism.

- Belief in the transformation of the earthly existence or the earthly city into a heavenly one, such as Jerusalem, Kashi, Go-loka.

- Exhortations and commandments to conquer human weaknesses such as that of anger, jealousy, malice, violence, greed; conquest of desires; principles of ethics based on such exhortations of self-conquest; within that context, the conquest of flesh in all forms.

- Similarities of rules for various monastic, celibate or virginal orders, such as the rules for the Vestal Virgins, the virgin guides of the community in American Indian traditions like the Oneida, or in the African Voodoo and other sacred traditions, or the institution of Kumari in Hinduism, especially so in Nepal; the similarity of rules of St. Benedict to the earlier rules for monks in the Buddhist, and yet more ancient, the Vedic renunciate orders of swamis.

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- The crucial belief that the human being exists to elevate himself through great diligence towards spiritual liberation and heavenly consciousness.

These are only a few of the examples of the parallels that exist among all religions whether (a) revealed independently of each other, or (b) through a mutual borrowing or accommodation due to a spiritual urge or co-existence.

We have given many examples of such experience of peace among religions in our earlier presentation on the Unifying Streams in Religion. All of these areas require a vast undertaking of research so that in the contemporary society, facing its problems, we may learn from the history of 'what has been right with the world'.

This is not to support the futile statements such as: all religions are one. In spite of the fact of these similarities cited above, the various streams of religions maintain their own doctrinal systems which do not agree in major areas of the world view or the vision and perception of the divine. We may divide humanity's religious experience into at least four major streams:

- Zarathustrian, which has loaned many fundamental ideas to all the religions of the world;

- The Abrahamic religions, that is Jewish, Christian and Islam;

- The Indian religions, the Vedic-Tamil-Hindu, Buddhist, *Jaina*, *Santa-mata*, Sikh tradition, and numerous others;

- Indigenous religions on all continents often dismissed as animistic or nature religions, because the depth of their philosophy has not been understood. This is simply due to the fact that their followers are economically disadvantaged and not articulate in the modern terminologies of the dominant religions. From Australia through Africa through all of the Americas there runs a common stream of deep reverence for the presence of the divine in all phenomena. This expresses itself in an uncountable variety of beliefs,

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doctrines, songs, stories, epics, rituals and the daily undertakings and interactions.

The Abrahamic religions may differ from each other on important points of the doctrine and yet they share a certain worldview among themselves. So also do the Indian religions, as well as the various Indigenous religions.

When we look at the parallels and similarities, as well as historical experience of peaceful coexistence in vast areas of human history, we are puzzled as to why there is such dissention and violence of thought (thought first), word and deed among the adherents of these faiths. A close look at the universal phenomena shows us that only a very subtle, slim line separates the positive from the negative, or prevents the positive energies from flowing into negative directions. Thus it is that distortions occur in the original message of love, tolerance and peace. Some of the examples of these distortions may be given as follows:

- Faith may turn into a frenzy of devotion manifesting itself in ecstatic song or dance or, on the other hand, into a fury of fanaticism.

- In almost all religions we read passages like 'I am saviour'. These passages are written in languages where the definitive article 'the' is not known. This is one single word that has caused an immeasurable amount of strife and suffering. We fail to reconcile the saying of Jesus 'I am Way', with Krishna's statement 'I am Way'. We fail to imagine that the same God has spoken through different embodiments of His own at different time periods, to different ones of his chosen people.

  Thus mixing the human weaknesses of anger, narrowness, intolerance with the readings of the scripture, the adherents of each faith misinterpret the scripture as an exhortation for exclusivity.

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- Often the scriptures are not read in the original but in translations even of translations, thus an original church member does not know what was the original intent of the words of Jesus in Aramaic translated into Hebrew or Greek or Latin or 16th century English or 21st century American. How many layers of obscuring dust we have laid upon the original meaning. Very easily our mental association with a word like 'apocalyptic' suggests that the Book of Apocalypse has to do with a destructive process rather than of the removal of a veil, unveiling, which is the original intent.

- As a religion spreads, in spite of its attempt to claim a purity, it picks up the ideas and thoughts originally held by the people who are now becoming converts. Often it enriches the religion as:

    a) the Tamil tradition enriched the Hindu thought of the Vedic origin;

    b) so did the Balinese traditions enrich the same;

    c) the Celts and the Druids and the Nordics enriched Christianity;

    d) the Persian tradition enriched Islam.

- Some of the prejudices of those original cultures also creep in and eclipse the original meaning. It is like the different peoples claiming to be racially pure, but none are proved to be so upon the examination of their genetic inheritance. It is now no longer possible to eradicate the genes inherited from the millennia of racial mix, so it is not possible to separate the original from the accretions in any religion. The efforts at doing so are not only self defeating, they are also destructive as, for example the attempts of some elements of contemporary Islam to 'purify' the Malay and Indonesian Islam by eliminating all that was preserved there from the original cultures.

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- Often the religions have become identified with ethnic groups and nations. One group of people, say in an African territory, accepts the tenets of Islam and another group accepts Christianity. The two are traditional enemies who have perpetrated acts of cruelty one upon the other. Now that cruelty becomes attributed to the religion that they have recently adopted, so it is perceived that the Christians are killing the Muslims or the Muslims are killing the Christians. Actually it is one tribal-minded group killing another tribal-minded group that now happens to have adopted a different religion.

- Often the strife among nations manifests itself as an attack on the religion of the defeated and the weaker. An event of this nature that may have occurred twenty-four or fourteen centuries ago is viewed by us today, here, as an act of religious persecution where as it is, by and large, a conqueror's attempt to destroy the identity of a certain people.

An example may be given of Alexander destroying the Zarathustrian fire temples and burning their holy books. Could the 'Guru' of Alexander of Macedonia, Aristotle the philosopher, have actually ordered his disciple to destroy such great works of philosophy as the *Gathas* and the *Avesta* of the Mazdayasnians. Yet the fact of destruction remains, the main purpose of which was the political subjugation of a nation by destroying its identity. This is easily achieved through the desecration and suppression of its religion.

- The propagandists of different religions have an age old habit of :

  1) a) choosing the best and most inspiring passages from their own texts, and

     b) the most creative and beautiful periods of their history, and at the same time

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2) to choose the worst passages and periods of history from the adherents of an opposite religion and compare the two. In return, those they oppose use the same tool, citing the best examples from their own scripture and history and attacking those of their own opponents.

Why not confess to ourselves of our own failures and expunge from our consciousness all that is destructive in our own understanding of the doctrine as well as our own history.

- The age old enmities among nations, easily identified with the religions that they follow, cultivate and perpetuate on one hand (a) an imperial complex, 'we were their rulers', and on the other hand (b) a persecution complex. Those who perceive themselves to be thus persecuted, now free, justify their own vendetta against their erstwhile rulers and so the cycle of mutual destruction continues.

- In the same vein follows the nostalgia for an imagined history, 'we were so great', 'our boundaries extended a hundred thousand miles in each direction, oh how have we shrunk'. If the people of a certain nation-religion (the nation and religion confused with each other) ruled over a certain area for a relatively brief period of history, they continue to claim those areas as parts of their national-religious boundaries and their psyche continues to strive to regain that lost power and glory.

- Religion is often used for purely mundane purposes. This is the entire history of Europe, as of many other continents. Examples: (a) looting of the Incas and the Aztecs and building the great Cathedrals of Europe; (b) preachers exalting the exploited workers to follow the work ethic by not protesting that their twelve year old children are working sixteen hours a day in the coal mines (as was the case to the end of the 19th century); (c) looting the vanquished so the temple/cathedral/mosque of the conqueror would be

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enriched; (d) the priests bounden to the secular heroes/kings/commanders/presidents and doing and saying whatever is expected of them by the donor.

Without total personal purification of the priest and the preacher this trend cannot be stopped and thus the continued misuse of religion for ethnic, national, political and economic purposes cannot cease.

Those who choose the false identity of nation and religion have been the cause of much suffering for humanity. The priests in each country pray for the victory of their countrymen and not for the people of the vanquished lands and nations even though they be of the same religion. In a world where ideals are cherished, in Anglo-French wars, to take a random example, the Anglican priest should be as concerned for the loss of the French lives as he grieves over the loss of the English ones, but the French priest prays for France, the English priest prays for England. And if the French happen to be Roman Catholics, well then, it is understood that they stand no chance to enter heaven so far as the Anglican priest is concerned!

The only way out of this dilemma is to define religion as separate from nation, state or political groupings. Unfortunately, even in countries where the separation of religion and state is a fundamental principle of the declared polity, the separation has never really occurred because the minds of the people have not changed and some pulpits continue to serve as avengers and not redeemers of the sinful "wicked."

This is a darker side of the picture of human mind as against the brighter one of which we have listed numerous examples above. It is the strength and purity manifest in those examples that would help divest the religion of all its negative accretions so that religion may serve as only a source of inspiration for non-violence and love.

Those who are pure enough to step out of the false identities imposed upon religion are the reformers and renunciates of history,

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often persecuted. A careful study of history will show that most often those who have divested themselves of the false identities associated with religion are the contemplatives. They have found their revelation in certain moments of mystery while travelling a path of self-examination, self-purification and thereby a direct experience of God.

It is the contemplatives who have understood that the origin of every religion is in some profound and unique internal experience of divinity that the original founder pursued with great diligence and ascetic endeavour and finally found it is in the state of such unique and profound consciousness that all revelations have occurred. It is for this reason that in all continents and among all peoples those who seek spiritual truth wander off into short or long periods of silence and solitude (Sufi *khalwa*, Sanskrit *ekanta*) that could be only forty days or could be ten years of duration. Once we have found this source of religion in these levels of consciousness we would not venture to sully the teachings arising out of it; we would try to maintain its purity and, if possible, would attempt to replicate the experience, nay, the methodical experiment in the mystic path that the founders of all religions had pursued. Thus it is the revival of the contemplative and meditative path that will return to us the pure inheritance of the core of spiritual experience and will prevent the repeat of the destruction that, as we have said, the false identities imposed on religion have wrought. In other words, the unity of religions is to be found in the dervesh, the pir, the mendicant, the wandering sadhu. It is they, who from all different religions in the past, often gathered together around some fire outside a wayside inn or a hermit's hut and discoursed about their experience of divinity or shared it in silence. These were the true inter-religious conferences the effects of which can be seen in the thread of unity and parallel experiences formed in rituals that we find among all peoples of the world.

To find unity among all religions we must strive for the unification of the individual soul with the Supreme Consciousness, call it God, or name it *Bodhi*. It is to achieve this union with God, which would then unite the spiritual guides of various faiths, that the

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contemplatives of all traditions went off to dwell in the solitary caves. We read in the ancient *Rig Veda*

> In the cave of the mountains,
>
> At the confluences of the rivers,
>
> one becomes wise by meditation.

Zarathushtra communed with the divine fire in a cave for ten years to receive the revelations bestowed by Ahur Mazda. There is a view that Jesus was not born in the manger but in a cave at Nazareth. The cave of St. Francis of Assisi still invokes a presence of peace in the pilgrim or the occasional visitor. Hazrat Mohamed often withdrew to the cave of Hira where the revelation of the Holy Koran occurred. The great yogis still dwell in the Himalyan caves. So do the contemplative coptic monks who do not leave the underground caves of their monasteries in Ethiopia for many years at a time. So also the contemplative monks of Mount Athos in Greece. All of these have understood the true origin of religion. Above all, of course, as the Upanishads say, is the Cave of the Heart, which the contemplative has learned to enter for true solitude. This he can do whether he is a cobbler sitting by a city street or a commander in the battlefield.

What do these unifiers of the human soul with God, and consequently the unifiers of humanity, do in the caves of contemplation? Here we repeat some of the parallels among religions which we have listed above. They undertake the practices of silence, fasting, celibacy, prayer, rosary, penitence, changing the position of the mind by experimenting with body positions, as well. The disciplines practiced in the periods of solitude cannot always be revealed to the uninitiated lest they cause harm. However, some of these can be undertaken by anyone whether he/she be a recluse or a lay woman.

From the vast repertoire of the methodologies of meditation known in the Sino-Indian traditions (*Dhyana-yoga, Jhana, C'han, Son, Zen*) we take a few that are practiced in common by different religions. The extent of sophistication in the varieties of methods may differ, but many principles of contemplative and meditative practices are

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held in common by the adherents of different faiths and religions and understanding of these will lead us to the core that cannot fail to unite us even if we follow different doctrines and various world views.

Only when one reaches the pinnacle of the personal experience of the Divine does s/he comprehend the original meaning of the scripture which records the founder's own inner ecstasy and revelation.

Here are some of the systems of contemplation and meditation that are common to the major religions. They can be listed here only briefly. The detailed practices may take decades to bear fruit, or they may fructify instantly, depending on the practitioner's level of internal purification.

Nama-smarana

Remembering the divine name.

Hari hari namu japu prana adharu...
Rama nama japi ekankaru

-the Guru Granth Sahib

Different religions and languages have different names for the Divinity. The Hindus recite 1008 names, each, of various manifestations of divinity. In Islam there are 99 that are commonly known. There are many ways of remembering the name: singing aloud, reciting, mumbling; thinking the name in the mind and the heart which then becomes meditation.

A guru, a pir, a spiritual director may assign a particular name for a disciple to recite constantly, with or without a rosary. The higher the spiritual status of the guide, the deeper in the mind, without vocalization, the disciple's experience of the Name. The disciple approaches the spiritual director with a request to confer to him/her a divine name for recitation and constant remembrance and promises to oneself to keep it ever in his heart, as we read in the Guru Grantha Sahib :

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Nanaka dijay nama dana
Rakhau hiye paroyee

Thus a divine name may often be used as a mantra, alone or in combination with other syllables and words. If you have objection to the word 'mantra', call it a one word prayer in silence, as we read in the classic Cloud of Unknowing. As the meditation grows, the remembrance of the name becomes natural, and deeply interiorized.

Such a name, taken into the depths of one's consciousness releases powerful purificatory energies, and generates internal celestial music. The sound of the sacred syllable, the secret of the mantra science, brings one face to face with one's Beloved God :

akhara nada kathana bakhiana...
drisatiman akhara hai jeta
nanaka para brahma niralepa
---Guru Granth Sahib

Here it should be remembered that one is advised to hold back the vocalizations. The texts do not say 'repeat the name' but that

Nanaka nama dhiayiye sacchi badiyayi
Says Nanak, meditate on the name and that is true greatness
---Guru Granth Sahib

Manana

Contemplating the meaning of a metaphysical phrase, or a word from the scriptures till the meaning becomes a reality to oneself.

In the Christian tradition one may choose, or be given by the spiritual director, a particular passage from the holy scripture, whether a line from a Psalm, or a saying of Jesus. To read. To ponder upon. To apply to one's deeper self to achieve a transformation within or to experience the closeness to God.

Similarly, the Sufi novitiate is given a phrase form the Holy Qur'an, the *kalam Allah*, which is 'revealed to humanity wrapped in many

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thousands of veils'. The *murid*, disciple contemplates a passage assigned by his Pir till one ceases to be 'dar wujud', in body, and has achieved the *nafs-e-haqiqat-e-khud*, the essence of the reality of self.

Those in the traditions of yoga meditation (belonging to whichever denomination of religion of Indian origin) are given similar passages from the Vedic, Buddhist, Jain, Sikh or any other tradition. The system of contemplation in the traditions of India is most refined in the Vedanta path. Every novitiate is given a *maha-vakya*, a Great Sentence, because of its depth of meaning. There are four main *maha-vakya*s in Vedanta but in other associated traditions one may choose from over a hundred. For example, the *maha-vakya* 'tat tvam asi' (That Thou Art) may take an entire life time to unravel internally. The *Gur-mantar* of the Sikhs, the five *nama-kara*s of the Jainas, and so forth – together with additional passages from the respective scriptures – may be presented to the mind to contemplate.

In all of these systems, there are parallel methodologies of using interiorized logic that constitutes *manana*, contemplation, *uha* (in the Yoga-sutras), *tarka* in the Tantric systems, the most essential part of an internal dialogue. Until one has completely assimilated the innermost meaning of such a word, phrase, or passage that a self-transformation has been completed, the assigned passage remains the object of contemplation day and night. So it is among the Sufis, Vedantins or yogis.

Riddles

Mutually contradictory or 'impossible' statements are used by numerous meditative traditions like the passages for contemplation. The purpose is (a) to take the mind beyond common logic, and (b) bring opposite concepts to a unification in transcendence. One may be required to unravel the riddle till a spiritual breakthrough and transformation of consciousness has occurred. This is again true of all contemplative systems.

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Body posture

Training oneself to assume a certain position for prayer, contemplation and self conquest is a common method in all religions. The sequence of various body position in the course of *namaz* or *salat* are an example of the same.

In Christianity, to pray while sitting on a hard bench, or kneeling, or standing, one becomes so absorbed in prayer and meditation that any body discomfort is forgotten. The stories of Christian saints remaining in the same positioning prayer throughout the night are legendary. The traditions of India, like yoga, are the most sophisticated and detailed in this regard, the Jaina *kayotsarga* practices being the foremost. The Sufi training is not too far behind. The same applies to *mudra*s, the hand positions as in Christian or Muslim prayer; the Indian traditions teach hundreds of such positions for different types and stages of prayer and worship.

Ambulatory prayer

Prayer while walking is one of the common practices among the followers of many religions. A Christian, Buddhist or a Hindu monk keeps turning the beads of his rosary or *mala* while walking. It is an inspiring site to see the Turkish lay people walking the streets of German cities while practising their *tasbeeh.* So also is the Tibetan with his prayer wheel.

One of the common examples of ambulatory prayer is the religious procession or circumambulation of holy sites, sacred cities and edifices, with or without prescribed rituals, practised in all religions. Such ambulatory prayer is am essential part of pilgrimage in all religions.

The deepest practice of the ambulatory prayer is contemplative walking taught in most Buddhist and swamis' monasteries, in Sufi *khanqah*s, Zen-dos, and is often practised by Christian monks. One walks to and fro within the confines of parallels lines of suitable length, or in a limited area of the monastery, or within a pattern,

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vyuha, such as a labyrinth. The detailed internal system of the contemplative walk is taught by the masters of various traditions.

Confession

Details of the internal dialogue for self purification and surrender is one of the core practices as part of the contemplative method. One examines one's weaknesses, argues pro and con, counters any tendency to 'giving excuses to oneself for oneself', confesses to oneself and renews the vow for self purification, to free oneself from any *gunah* – sin – or zillat – a slip. Slowly one fills any remaining gaps between oneself and God. The Christian confesses to his sinfulness; the Hindu recites, 'papo'ham', and seeks to cleanse oneself of the transgressions committed in the day or night, with thought, word or deed, in the words of the Veda :

Yad-ahna papam-akarsham...
Yad ratrya papam akarsham...
Manasa vacha karmana...

So the Mazda-yasnian in the liturgies of Khurd-Avesta:

Az an gunah manashni gavashni kunashni,
Tani ravani, geti minoani, okhe awakhsh pasheman pa se
Gavashni pa patet hom... Kshaothra ahurahe mazda

Without such recognition of interior impurities one cannot progress to the ideal of evoking the presence of the divine in the earthly.

Such confession then leads to acts of penitence, *prayashchitta*, not only for transgressions committed but the duties and acts of love, service and devotion omitted :

Kim aham papam akaravam
Kim aham sadhu nakaravam
What transgressions I have committed;
What right acts I have omitted.

---the Vedic liturgy

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In Islam, thus, without repentance, *tawba,* there is no sainthood.

It is in this context of the contemplative speaking to one's own mind, that we read the many Indian saints' songs addressed to the mind to purify itself, and not to waylay the pilgrim on the path to God :

Karahale mana pardesiya...
Mana karahala sati guru purakhu dhiyai...
--- Guru Granth Sahib

One prays for the removal of all stains and signs of ego and anger from the mind so that the mind may become a fit vehicle to lead one to God :

Jaba ihu mana mahi karata gumana;
Taba ihu bavaru phirata bigana.
--- Guru Granth Sahib

Visualizations

Many different forms of visualizations with devotion and surrender are practised as part of the contemplative and meditative systems based in the various faiths.

A Christian may visualize the suffering of Christ on the stations of the cross; s/he may visualize His compassionate visage; or the Pieta figure; or the mental image of a saint. This may be accompanied with the contemplations of sacred phrases as described above.

In the Hindu liturgy, the very first act is the mental recitation of the *dhyana-shloka,* the verse for visualization meditation, not merely invoking the presence of the Divinity but 'seeing' the presence in the mind's eye, full in all iconographic detail.

The most elaborate visualizations are taught in the Tibetan tradition which we need not depict here. The practice of visualization as a system of meditation is elaborate and is shared by many traditions. The images repeatedly imprinted upon the mind lead to (a) an

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internal transformation, (b) revelation of the true nature of one's chosen form of the Deity, and (c) eventual identification with the divine figure so that the attributes of the Divine descend into the very soul of the devotee.

One of the forms of visualization is a concentration on the image of a written word or symbol, such as the sign of Om, the Arabic form of 'Allah', a *svastika*, the cross in its many versions, and even the chosen name or mantra written and visualized in the usual script. A Sufi may visualize the very first *nuqteh*, *bindu*, the dot under the Arabic letter 'bay' (letter 'B') with which the Qur'an begins. Or one may visualize the same dot on top of the sign for Om. Through this literally one-pointed concentration one may enter the gateway to infinity.

Some visualizations are practised in the heart, some in the forehead, and so forth, together with many possible embellishments. We cannot go into these vast details in this limited space.

Identification

Whatever one dwells upon that verily does s/he become :

yo yach-chraddhah sa eva sah (BhG 17.3)

When one visualizes one's chosen form of divinity, together with the appropriate name, mantra or prayer, and it becomes a constant baseline thought and a 'feeling' within oneself, the transformation that occurs produces a sense of identity with the Beloved One. Those who thus keep the Deity in their heart and mind, begin to exhibit traits similar to the object of their worship. The Buddhist develops the Buddha-like mien and *mudra*; the Sufi seeks to become like Ali and Ishmael; the Christian experiences the stigmata. At that point it is difficult to draw the line between the consciousness of the devotee and the Deity. When the Vedantic affirmation *tat tvam asi*, 'that thou art' is applied to *bhakti-yoga*, in this relationship, one states oneself to be 'That', *so'ham*, 'I am That'; *shivo'ham*, 'I am Shiva'; *ana anta wa-anta ana* – says the Sufi, "I am you and you are I'.

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This seeking of some degree of identification, to become Christ-like, to become Buddha-like, is common to all religions.

Breathing

The meditative practice most commonly shared by various religions is that of prayer with breath. This takes many simple or progressively complex forms. Let each breath become a prayer : this is an exhortation to all devotees.

The awareness of breath flow is the primary alphabet of meditation. It is part of the practice of mindfulness (*sati-patthana* in Buddhism, *smrty-upa-sthana* in the Yoga-sutras).

In *vipassana* system no particular prayer word is permitted – that is the general impression. However, the author has met Thai monks who use a name of the Buddha in its Pali language version, *buddho.* In Northern Buddhism, as in the yoga tradition, the use of a short mantra in synchrony with the breath is a common practice. Similar practices are included in the Jaina meditative tradition of *preksha-dhyana.*

One learns to breathe diaphragmatically; breathes slowly, gently, without a jerk, and without a sound in the breath; feels the flow and touch of the breath in the nostrils. One keeps the mantra or the prayer word flowing in the mind while sensing and observing the gentle breath flow.

This practice has many variations which are prescribed by the meditation guide to students of different capacities and personalities. For example, observing the breath flow from the navel and letting the word also flow. Or, remembering the word in the cavity of the heart.

The Buddhist and yoga meditation practices of breath meditation have exact identical parallels in the Sufi practice of *Dhikr* (Zikr). So also, the Christian meditative tradition like the hesychasm includes the exact same methods. Even St. Ignatius of Loyola includes prayer with breath rhythms in his Spiritual Exercises .

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We read in the Sikh scripture :

Sasi sasi aradhe niramala soi janu

Only one who worships in every breath becomes a pure person.

---Guru Granth Sahib

The practices of prayer and meditation with breath awareness are the most commonly shared ones among various religions.

Common Prayer

In inter-religious gatherings it has been a common practice for the guides of different faiths to lead a prayer, each according to his tradition. The true unity of prayer, however, occurs in silence. Even though it is customary to take a minute or two of silence to mark special events, the true meditative and contemplative silence of the mind is rare.

Only the minds at peace within can deliberate on ways of finding peace among societies. The minds that are not harmonized within cannot bring about harmony in the external world of relationships. It would be best that wherever there are gathered together people of different faiths, languages, nationalities, they begin and end their deliberations by entering a deep state of silence through the practice of prayer in each breath. Its efficacy for bringing a sense of unity and a feeling of peace can be demonstrated universally in no more than five minutes of silence guided by one proficient in meditation.

An objection may be raised to such 'method in silence' by those who do not believe in any form of prayer. Even then, meditation practice without a prayer or a sacred phrase can be proved to effect a peaceful state of mind. This has been proved in numerous medical and scientific experiments. It is indeed possible to meditate without having a belief in God or prayer. Follow the same method of breath awareness as described above, and simply count the breaths. Again, there are many ways to do the count in various permutations which can be learnt from an authentic teacher.

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Here we need to address one more question. In the inter-religious gatherings, how many religions are truly represented. The economically disadvantaged and not very articulate in the modern terminologies have no influence on the deliberations and the decision making processes. Only the 'great religions of the world' have a voice. What distinguishes the 'great religions' from the 'not so great' ones? Is it the economic or political power? Is it contemporary influence through that power? What does that have to do with true spirituality? Is it the large number of adherents? Who are we say that the fact of an idea being upheld by a large number constitutes its greatness as an idea *per-se*.

Are we great because we are aggressive conquerors who have decimated the numbers, power and strength of the weaker vanquished ones and use that powermongering as an argument in favour of our greatness whereas when in the eyes of God, as we know, it is the meek who are truly great.

The way we way and view the greatness of a religion, would Shinto be a included among the 'great religions' if Japan, perchance, had won the war? Would Voodoo be a 'great religion' if its adherents had not been colonized and had developed economic power?

In the view of a silent meditator, a religion is great not on these grounds but because:

> it has influenced the past history in a selfless and beneficial way and has given birth and impetus to arts, sciences and peaceful social structures ; and
>
> its ideas are philosophically sound and lead to spiritual elevation of human mind.

Thus, the Zarathushtrian tradition with maximum quarter million adherents, the Jaina faith with a few million followers, as well as some of the indigenous traditions worldwide are just as great as the more populous religions that hold the reins of secular power and use it to prove that they are thereby great. In our endeavours for unity

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among religions we need to undertake, *inter alia,* the following measures.

1. The adherents of different faiths resolve not to judge the value of a religion as great or small but include all religions in their deliberation regarding whateer affects the humanity at large.

2. The leaders guides and scholars of each religion institute research into their own past; confess to themselves and then to the world regarding their own historical transgressions against the peoples of others' faiths : Did we destroy the places of worship of any other religions; did we use force or fraud, and so forth. Then apologise and atone for the transgressions committed.

3. Resolve not to condemn the adherents of other religions nor criticise or denounce their doctrine, belief system and practices. Rather, we state only our own belief systems recognizing the beauty of those of others with reverence and in a spirit of love.

4. Undertake research into (A) the commonalities of religious belief and spiritual experience, (B) the examples of mutual respect and accommodation in the vast areas of history so as to learn from the same the answers to the problems of our contemporary strife.

5. Prepare textbooks showing the commonalities of religious experience while respectfully recognizing the beauty of particular beliefs that are specific to certain religions.

6. As part of peace education, undertake to train the minds to be at peace through the practice of meditation by making para-religious meditation practice as highly recommended part of the curriculum in schools worldwide. For the non-believers also the completely religion-neutral meditation systems be suggested.

7. Honour the wise and the elders of all religions equally.

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8. The contemplative masters of all schools must be brought into consultation on how to cease using spirituality as synonymous with religion, that is:

   a) 'spirituality' and 'religion' no longer be used as synonyms;

   b) spirituality be defined as a system of:

      i. values for the individual and the society,

      ii. development of non-violent, tolerant, forgiving personality;

   c) a life style of devotion and personal contemplative experience, without prejudice and judgement against 'other' systems of religion, society, culture, ethnicity and creed.

9. The leaders in all spheres of life need to find ways to honour the wise and the elders of all religions equally.

May human beings learn to remember what has been harmonious and beautiful in the past and may they recognize what is right in the present.

May we implement the lessons of these beautiful experiences to fill the voids of the human mind to vanquish the miseries suffered by countless millions. May peace be translated into our earthly endeavours without as it is experienced in the heavenly consciousness within.

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http://www.bindu.org
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BRIEF INTRODUCTION

- He taught Patañjali's Yoga-sūtras first time at the early age of 9.

- Impressed by his extraordinary scholarship at the early age of 13-14, several prominent scholars published articles in praise of him and that started his career as a travelling lecturer. He was known for his competency to lecture instantly, without prior notice, on any mantra of the four Vedas. At that age he lectured extensively in colleges and universities. In North India, thousands of people attended his lectures.

- Since February 1947, he has been travelling and promulgating the Yogic and Vedic knowledge in numerous countries for the past 59 years.

- He has access to 17 languages with varying degrees of Fluency. He leads students into meditative avenue in their own languages such as Spanish, Italian, and French. He learnt Italian in one night by fusing the language with the yoga-nidrā state. His expertise in all philosophical and meditative traditions of the world enables him to instruct students in accordance with their own religio-philosophical background.

- He guides yoga and meditation groups in 30 countries from all continents. It is not unusual for him to settle up to a hundred thousand meditators into meditation within a few minutes.

- Scholars of yoga philosophy all over the world esteem his two-volume 1300 pages comprehensive commentary on the first two chapters of Patañjali's Yoga-sūtras as the most authentic. Some scholars equate him with Vijñāna-bhikshu, a famous Vedantic-Yogi commentator on the Yoga-sūtras in the 16th century.

- He acquired his academic degrees [B.A. (Honors) (London), M.A. (London), Dr.Litt. (Holland), F.R.A.S.] in merely two years (1965-1967) from European universities. Known as a scholar-saint, he held the post of Sanskrit Professor in a prestigious American university. As a research guide he has guided many scholars in their high level research in numerous fields.

- A published poet in English, he is a prolific writer with 13 books and 30 booklets to his credit.

- In 1969, he was initiated into the subtlest state of mediation by his teacher Swami Rama of the Himalayas, who is famous for his *Living with the Himalayan Masters* and 45 other books. That same year, he founded 'The Meditation Center' in Minneapolis, USA.

- In late 1981, he was appointed as the head of the Rishikesh Ashram (India), his guru's seat. Since his master's *maha-samadhi* (passing) in November 1996, he continues to enlighten the hearts and minds of thousands of aspirants by leading them into deep meditation.

- In recent years he has been deeply involved in the neurophysiology of meditative states in a number of highly recognized research laboratories in several continents.

- In 2002, he founded the Swami Rama Sadhaka Grama in Rishikesh, which also houses the headquarters of The Association of Himalayan Yoga Meditation Societies International (servig as a centre for Swami Veda's global network) as well as Swami Rama Dhyana Gurukulam also known as Swami Rama Institute of Meditation and Interfaith Studies under the auspices of Dhyana Mandiram Trust.

- Because of his mastery of various religions and numerous languages, he has been active in internationally established interfaith activities and conferences.

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- With all of the above undertakings, he has also maintained a life of giving charitable assistance to the needy in various ways.

- In addition to being the Founder-guide of Swami Rama Sadhaka Grama, he has held the position of president of Swami Rama's Ashram since 1982 (except for the period of 1988-96), and as spiritual guide to the Himalayan Institute Hospital Trust since 1995.

- Few of the places where he has lectured or participated in conferences include :
  (A) Numerous universities and colleges, Churches, conferences of interfaith leaders in India, Europe and USA, as well as such prestigious institutions as Bharatiya Vidya Bhawan in London and Bangalore, Nehru Centre in London, Kaivalya Dham at Lonavla, India and so forth.
  (B) Numerous conferences of the European Yoga Union, as well as national yoga unions in Europe, since 1999,
  (C) Dag Hammerskold Hall of the United Nations (conferences of the World Council of Religious Leaders), 2002 onwards,
  (D) World Parliament of Religions, Cape Town (2000), and Barcelona, Spain (2004).
  (E) Shakespeare's Globe Theatre,
  (F) Site of Plato's Academy in Athens, Greece(2006),
  (G) Delegation of the World Council of Religious Leaders visiting Israel-Palestine 2004,
  (H) Yoga Conference on bringing together African and Indian Spirituality, sponsored by the Ministry of Culture and the Foreign Ministry, Burkina Faso (French West Africa), 2002,
  (I) Congregational dialogue with Bishop Otis at the Episcopalian Cathedral in Salt Lake City, Utah,
  (J) Dialogue(2005) with the Taoist guides at the Chinese Taoist Association Headquarters in Beijing and with the director of China Taoism at the Seat where Lao Tz had taught,
  (K) Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University, Chicago,
  (L) World Trade Centre, Rotterdam, Holland,
  (M) Commonwealth Club, San Francisco,
  (N) Institute of Noetic Sciences, California,
  (O) Industrial Society Group, London,
  (P) Unesco Institute of Hydraulic Engineering, Delft, Holland,
  (Q) Many conferences of leaders in improving understanding among various religions,
  (R) Others, too numerous to list.

- Following on the footsteps of his Master, Swami Veda Bharati has maintained a keen interest in the scientific, medical and therapeutic studies of yoga meditation.
  He has demonstrated his capability for changing brain wave patterns in various meditation states as well as the power of mind over external matter, for example, through his concentration making a random numbers producing machine to produce coherent numbers. Such experiments have taken place in the laboratories like the Institute of Noetic Sciences (founded by the astronaut Edgar Mitchel) in California and Bremen University in Germany.

  See the publication Yogi in the Lab.

  In another experiment on 24th July 2006 at the Institute of Noetic Sciences he demonstrated deflecting a photon beams in an interferometer (placed in a soundproof Faraday Chamber with one foot thick steel wall between the machine and the experimenters) through the concentration of mind. The result obtained statistically showed a chance of one billion and two million to one.

  He also directs a small laboratory at his Institute in Rishikesh, India to study beneficial changes in brain wave patterns during various stages of yoga meditation practices.

- He has been interviewed many times by such media as BBC and CNN(Asia).

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